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Secretary of the Seminar: Dr Ardle Mac Mahon
Seminar for Arabian Studies, c/o Institute of Archaeology (UCL),
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e-mail seminar.arab@durham.ac.uk

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The processional road between Old Mārib and the Awām temple in the light of a recently discovered inscription from Maḥram Bilqīs

MOHAMMED MARAQTEN

The American Foundation for the Study of Man [AFSM], under the supervision of Mrs. Merilyn Phillips Hodgson, has been excavating at the Awām temple, or Maḥram Bilqīs, near Mārib since 1998. These archaeological activities are a continuation of the work which Wendell Phillips carried out at the Maḥram Bilqīs between November 1951 and February 1952 (Albright 1958: 215–268). Five seasons of excavation have now been carried out in the AFSM's renewed campaign, and its discoveries include new buildings outside the ovoid wall of the temple, significant archaeological artefacts (Glanzman 1999: 73–88; 2002: 187–201), and a sizeable collection of previously unknown inscriptions (Maraqten 2002: 209–216; Maraqten & Abdallah 2002: 49–53). Further, more than 120 inscriptions have been discovered in the last season (February to April 2004), primarily in the Peristyle Hall. A team of AFSM epigraphists including Dr. Yusuf Abdallah, Muṭahhar Iryānī and myself are currently preparing a publication of these inscriptions, which will appear in the ongoing AFSM publication series.

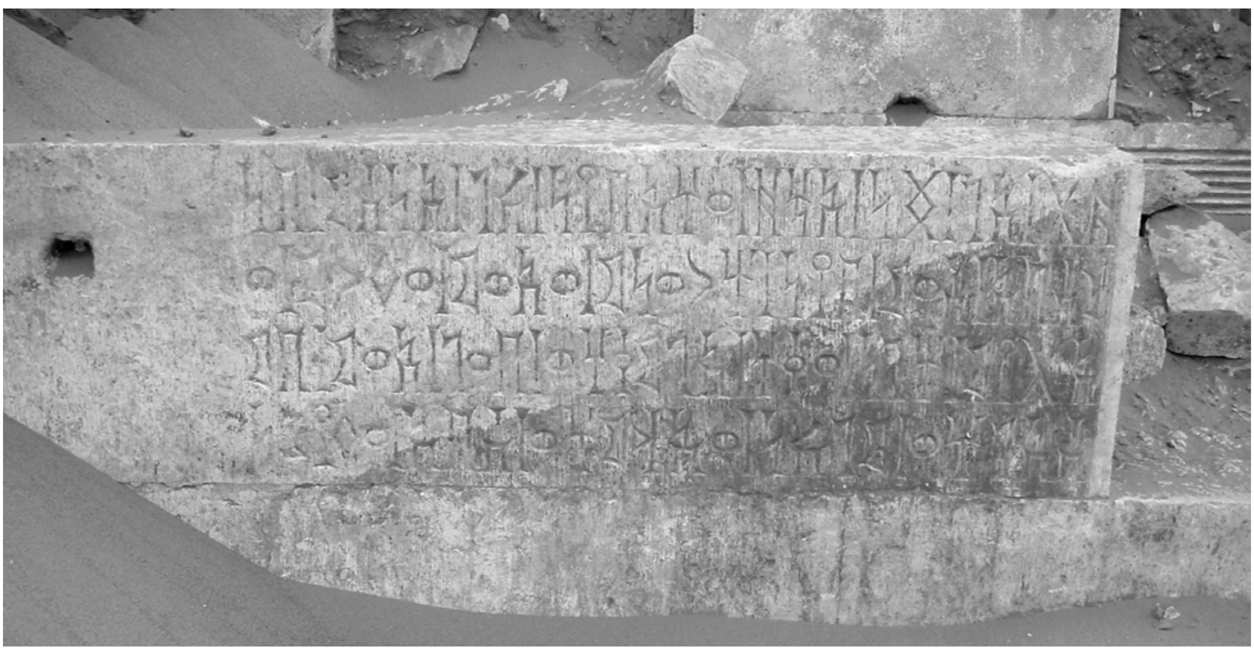


FIGURE 1. *MB 2002 I–20.*

A new inscription mentioning the processional road between Old Mārib and the Awām temple

Among the important inscriptions discovered in the 2002 season, one gives information about *ms^{1}bʾ/ʾwm*, "the Awām Road", a route connecting the old city of Mārib and the Awām sanctuary. This four-line inscription, MB 2002 I–20, measures 75 cm in length and 29 cm in height on a block with a total height of 35 cm. The letters are 6 cm in height with 1 cm spacing between the letters (Fig. 1). It was originally covered with red paint, some of which is still preserved. It was discovered *in situ* on the north-west side of the external wall of the Peristyle Hall at the Awām temple. Palaeographically, this inscription can be dated to the Middle Sabaic period, around the second or third century AD.

Text

1. *ḏt/ʾl/s^{3}n/ʾḫḏ/whʾbyn/kl/ʾns^{1}m/bn*
2. *ms^{1}bʾ/ʾwm/byn/ḥrwnm/wʾwm/wfrm/w*
3. *ʾtym/ḥgn/wqh/ʾlmqhw/bʿl/ʾwm/bm*
4. *s^{1}ʾlhw/mlkn/wʾdmhw/s^{1}bʾ/wfys^{2}n*

Translation

1. It is not permitted to seize and to prevent anybody from [using]
2. the processional road of Awām between Ḥarwanum and Awām,
3. neither one going forth [to Awām, i.e. a pilgrim] nor one coming back [also a pilgrim]. Thus ordered the [god] Almaqahū, lord of Awām, in his oracle
4. to the king and to his servants, Sabaʾ and Fays²ān.

Commentary

Line 1. The first line starts with a phrase which occurs frequently in Sabaic legal documents, namely *ḏt/ʾl/s^{3}n*, "it is not permitted" or "it is illegal", see, for instance, Robin-Kāniṭ 6/1. The root *s^{3}nn* means "be legal, be lawful" (SD p. 139; Biella 1982: 507) and is followed by two infinitives, *ʾḫḏ/whʾbyn*.
— The verb *ʾḫḏ* means "take, seize" and is known in the South Arabian inscriptions particularly in military contexts with the meaning "to take someone as prisoner, to capture" (SD pp. 3f.; Biella 1982: 10–12). In one Sabaic inscription, for instance, a king sent men *lʾḫḏ/lhw/ʾḫḏm /bn/ms^{1}bʾ/hgrnhn* "in order to seize for him [somebody] as a prisoner from the expeditionary force of the two cities" (Ja 665/20).
— The stem *hʾbyn* is an infinitive of the causative stem, *hʾby*, of the root ʾ–B-Y. This form of infinitive shows the ending *–n*.[1] The original meaning of the root ʾ–B-Y seems to be "want, desire" and it also has the meaning "refuse" in Arabic (Lane pp. 12f.). *Hʾby*, the causative stem, can be understood as "to stop, prevent, hinder". This interpretation is based on Arabic *ʾabaya*, which also has the meaning of *imtanaʿa* "refrain, abstain, keep from doing something" and of *manʿ* "hindering, prevention". Furthermore, the Arabic lexica gloss the verb *ʾabā* as *kariha* "be disgusted" (e.g. *Lisān s.v. ʾby*), and the causative stem *akraha* means "to force [to do or not do something], to compel". As a parallel to Arabic *akraha*, *hʾby* as the causative stem of *ʾby*, could then be understood as "to force or take hold of somebody". However, in our inscription the first interpretation of *hʾbyn* as "to prevent" is to be preferred, since *ʾḫḏ* and *hʾbyn* are the verbal expressions of two different actions which are forbidden, namely to seize somebody (*ʾḫḏ*) or to prevent somebody (*hʾby*) or stop him from entering or passing on the Awām road. The object is *kl/ʾns^{1}m* "every person, any person".
Line 2. The phrase *bn/ms^{1}bʾ/ʾwm* means "from the Road of Awām" and its location is exactly defined as *byn/ḥrwnm/wʾwm*, "between Ḥarwanum and Awām". However, using the particle *byn* "between", namely between the two temples, gives the impression of a movement of worshippers or pilgrims in this space, namely the "Awām Road", and indicates that ceremonies were performed on this road. It is interesting that our new inscription defines both the beginning and end points of the road. It starts in Ḥarwanum and ends at Awām.
— The term *ms^{1}bʾ* "road" is attested several times in the Sabaic inscriptions. For instance, we are informed about the construction of *kl/mnqltn/wkl/ms^{1}bʾ/sbʾ/ln/ḫlf/ʿrn/ʿmln/ʿd/ḫlf/mryb* "All hill paths and roads from the gate of the fortress ʿAmlān to the gate of Maryab" (CIH 955+418/2, von Wissmann 1982: 346ff.). The fortress ʿAmlān is located to the east of Ṣirwāḥ.
— The object *kl/ʾnsm* "every person, any person" designates a pilgrim or a visitor, i.e. *wfrm/wʾtym*. — *wfr*: The meaning of the verbal stem *hwfr*, "to perform a pilgrimage, celebrate a feast" is well established in the Sabaic inscriptions (SD pp. 157f.; Biella 1982: 139f.).[2] In Geʿez, the root *wfr* means "go to a field (for any agricultural activity), go out into a countryside, feed in a pasture" and, by extension, to "go to any place" (Leslau 1991: 606f.). The basic meaning of *wfr* in this inscription seems to be "somebody who is going to Awām to perform or to undertake a pilgrimage", or possibly just

for the purpose of visiting the temple. However, the traffic along the road to Awām seems to have been primarily connected with pilgrimage. It is legitimate to suggest that the term *wfr* in this inscription should be understood in relation to pilgrimage to the Awām temple, since this temple was the most important one in ancient Yemen and also the main pilgrimage-site in the whole region.

The common meaning of the root *ᵓtw/ᵓty* in Sabaic is "come, come to, come back, arrive at a destination". The verb *ᵓty* with the meaning "come back", is especially well-attested in military contexts (SD p. 9; Biella 1982: 28f.). Moreover, this verb is also well-attested in Sabaic, e.g. *tᵓtww/bn/mn/mḥrmn/ḏᵓwm* "coming back from the sacred area temple of Awām" (Ja 735/12).

The phrase *kl/ᵓns^{1}m* ... *wfrm/wᵓtym* may mean simply "anybody, pilgrim or visitor", i.e. distinguishing between pilgrims and those who are simply visiting the temple. As such, it may be an example of *merismus*, that is the use of two opposites to designate the whole (e.g. the expression "all creatures great and small", to express the concept of "the whole of creation"),[3] and would be paralleled in the phrase *kl/ᵓ*[*n*]*s^{1}m/bhṭm/wqṭnm* "Everybody, great or small" (e.g. in CIH 619/2) which is attested several times in juridical inscriptions as an expression for "all, everybody, without exceptions". On the other hand, *kl/ᵓns^{1}m* ... *wfrm/wᵓtym* could mean "anybody [who is] either going forth [to Awām, i.e. a pilgrim or a visitor] or coming back [also a pilgrim or a visitor]". I would prefer the latter, since it suggests ceremonial movement on the Awām Road.

Such a movement between the two holy places, namely the temples Awām and Ḥarwanum, could be understood as a kind of ritual performed on the Awām Road. If this is correct, the phrase *kl/ᵓns^{1}m* ... *wfrm/wᵓtym* might refer to this specific religious ritual movement between these two temples of Almaqah, possibly during the time of pilgrimage, similar to the Islamic ceremony of *saᶜy*, running between the two holy places Ṣafā and Marwah in Mecca during the Islamic pilgrimage.[4]

— *Ḥrwnm* (Ḥarwanum/Ḥarūnum) was the main temple of the Sabaean national deity Almaqah in the old city of Mārib, and is probably located under the present-day Masjid Sulayman, near the foot of the citadel. It is attested several times in the inscriptions (e.g. Ja 584/9; Ja 657/14–15).

Line 3. *ḥgn*, (< the root Ḥ-N-G) means "as, according to" (SD p. 69). The verb *wqh* means to "command, order" (SD p. 161) and the noun *ms^{1}ᵓl* has the meaning "oracle" (SD p. 121). Thus the phrase *wqh/ᵓlmqhw /bᶜl/ᵓwm/bms^{1}ᵓlhw* can be translated "Thus ordered the god Almaqahū, lord of Awām, in his oracle". The formula *ḥgn/wqh/ᵓlmqh* is attested several times in the Sabaic inscriptions (e.g. YM 547 = CIAS 32.21/r 1/1), see also *ḥgn/wqht/s^{2}ms^{1}m* "as Shamsum has decreed" (CIH 571/1).

Line 4. The inscription states that this decree was made through the oracle of the god Almaqahū to "the king and to his worshippers: Sabaᵓ and Fays^{2}ān" (*mlkn/wᵓdmhw /s^{1}bᵓ/wfys^{2}n*). However, the name of the king is not mentioned in the inscription. Both *ᵓs^{2}ᶜb* (sg. *s^{2}ᶜb,* "sedentary tribe"), Sabaᵓ and Fays^{2}ān, occur several times in the Sabaic inscriptions (e.g. CIH 609/7) and Fays^{2}ān seems to have played an important role in the Sabaean federation.

The function and significance of the inscription

This inscription was discovered *in situ* and should be considered in its archaeological context. Its function was the protection of pilgrims and visitors to the Awām temple, who at times had presumably been accosted and robbed. Because of this, a religious injunction or law by the god Almaqah had to be proclaimed to protect his worshippers. This inscription proves that not only the grounds of the Awām temple but also the processional road to it, were considered holy, and that certain behaviour was forbidden there.

The protection of pilgrims during their journey to Mārib was the duty of the king, and sometimes he had to take measures to ensure their safety, as stated in one Sabaic inscription from the Maḥram Bilqīs which informs us that an officer (*mqtwy*) was sent to Mārib by the king Shammar Yuharᶜish, king of Sabaᵓ and Dhū-Raydān (early fourth century AD) *lnẓr/wtnṣfn/(b)hgrn/ mrb/lḥḍr/ᵓbhy* "to take care of the performance of the rites of the pilgrimage in the city of Mārib during the pilgrimage time in [the month] of Dhū-ᵓAbhay" (Ja 651/16–17). In other places, such safety-measures were ordered by the deity, as in the case of the god Taᵓlab who decreed that action be taken to protect the pilgrims within the sacred area (RES 4176/2).

Our inscription proves that "the Awām Road", from Ḥarwanum to Awām, was considered to be part of the temenos of the Awām temple. Two things made this road sacred. Firstly, it bears the same name, Awām "place of refuge", as the temple itself. Secondly, it is a link between the two temples and is therefore itself a holy place.

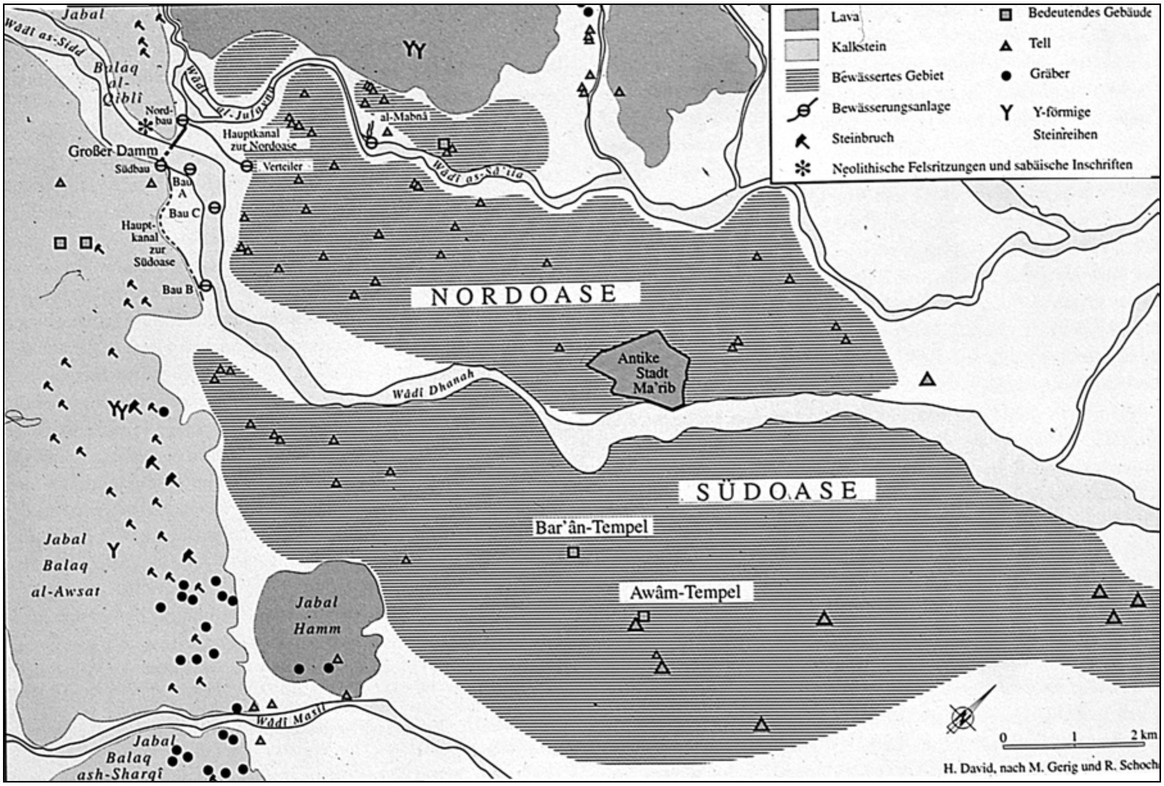


FIGURE 2. *A plan showing the relationship of Old Mārib to the Awām temple (Maḥram Bilqīs). (From Seipel 1998: 180).*

Our inscription belongs among those divine decrees which have the function of regulating the relationship between the deity and the worshipper (e.g. RES 4176; Ghul-Mārib 1) or the treatment of the property of the temple or the deity (e.g. MB 2002 I–6).

Processions and processional roads in Ancient Yemen

In ancient Yemen there is both epigraphic and archaeological evidence for the existence of processions and processional roads. There appear to have been two standard South Arabian terms meaning "procession", namely *ms¹bʾ* and *mhyᶜ*, both having the basic meaning "road, way" (on *mhyᶜ,* see Nebes 2000: 298–302).

Two main types of temples have been found in Yemen: the *intra muros* and the *extra muros*. *Intra muros* temples include several in Timnaᶜ, the temple of Ḥarwanum in Mārib, etc. Examples of *extra muros* temples include the Awām and Barʾān temples south of Mārib and temples found outside other cities.

Roads seem to have been built to connect the cities, or the temples contained within them, to the *extra muros* temples. Indeed, some inscriptions mention the construction of such roads, which can be described as sacred and processional ways. The term used to describe these roads is *ms¹bʾ*, as in our inscription. For example, the road (*ms¹bʾ*) which linked Shibām Sukhaym with the temple of Taʾlab, erected on the side of the hill of Dhū-Marmar, is described in one inscription as *ms¹bʾ/ᶜrn/ḏmrmr* "The processional road of the hill-citadel of Dhū-Marmar" (RES 4624/4). Further, a minister of the god Taʾlab, who undertook several public construction projects, is mentioned as having *ᶜḏb/ms¹bʾ/ᶜrn* "repaired the road of the hill-citadel" (CIH 338) — i.e. Itwat, where the temple of Taʾlab was established. This inscription is engraved on a rock beside this processional road. The interpretation of *msbʾ* as "a procession" is based on the attestation of the verb *s¹bʾ* in the meaning of "to make a procession" (Ja 735/7) which allows us to translate *ms¹bʾ/ʾwm* as "processional road of Awām" in our new inscription.

Remains of some of the processional roads of ancient Yemen have survived. A good example is the approximately six-kilometre-long processional road at Jabal al-Lawdh in the Jawf, which starts at the bottom of the hill and goes up to the temple on the summit (Robin & Breton 1982; von Wissmann 1982: 164f.; Daum 1999/2000: 223ff.).

Our inscription proves the existence of "the Awām Road", connecting the old city of Mārib with the Maḥram Bilqīs sanctuary *c.* 3.5 km to the south. However, the road itself still awaits discovery. Glaser suspected that one had once existed, and he recorded part of a bridge crossing Wādī Dhana in the direction of Awām (Müller DH & Rhodokanakis 1913: 45). The expedition of Wendell Phillips in 1951-1952 also attempted to find it.

During the AFSM's second field season (1999) at the Maḥram Bilqīs, a group from the University of Calgary, working as part of the AFSM team under the direction of W. Glanzman, carried out a ground-penetrating radar survey over part of the site. They targeted the western side of the sanctuary beyond the North-west Doorway specifically to test for the presence of a Processional Way leading from the bridge to the sanctuary. Their results demonstrated the existence of a wide, flat area which could be the remains of a pavement similar to those which may have been found on other processional roads (Moorman *et al.* 2001: 185f.). If this is correct, it would be the second longest processional road in ancient Yemen, after that of Jabal al-Lawdh.[5]

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Notes

1. On the construction of the infinitive in Sabaic, see Nebes 1988: 63ff.; and Stein 2002: 393ff.
2. On the etymology of *wfr*, see Müller WW 1997: 101 and Lundin 1987: 55, who put the *wfr* I and *wfr* II of the SD together and translated them both as "to cultivate". However, it seems that the root W-F-R in Sabaic has the same double meaning as Arabic *ᶜamara*, namely to "cultivate" and to "perform a pilgrimage", cf. Arabic *iᶜtamara* "to perform the *ᶜumrah*", and *ᶜāmirūn* "those who have performed an *ᶜumrah*". The *ᶜumrah* is "a pilgrimage to Mecca which need not be performed at a particular time in the year, unlike the *ḥajj*, and involves fewer ceremonies" (*Lisān s.v. ᶜmr*).
3. On *merismus* in the Sabaic inscriptions, see Sima 2001: 304ff.
4. On the rituals of the pre-Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, see Zaytūnī 1987: 273-282.
5. Other processional roads are considerably shorter. That at al-Hajrah is 68 m long, that at Raybūn is 58 m long and that at Makaynūn is 65 m long (Breton 1980: 5ff.).

Sigla

CIAS	Inscriptions in Pirenne & Beeston 1977.
CIH	Inscriptions in *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*. Pars IV. *Inscriptiones Ḥimyariticas et Sabaeas continens*. Paris: Reipublicae Typographeo, 1889-1932.
Ghul-Mārib 1	Inscription in Bron 1992: 69.
I	Inscription
Ja 584, 657, 651,665, 735	Inscriptions in Jamme 1962.
Lane	Lane 1863–1893.
Lisān	Ibn Manẓūr 1955–1956.
MB	Registration siglum of inscriptions discovered by the AFSM excavations at Maḥram Bilqīs 1998–.
RES	Inscriptions in *Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique*. (8 volumes). Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1900-1968.
Robin-Kānit 6	Inscription in Robin 1982, ii: 52–55.
SD	Beeston e*t al.* 1982.
YM	Yemen Museum registration number.

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Author's address
Dr Mohammed Maraqten, Seminar für Semitistik, Wilhelm-Röpke-Strasse 6F, 35032 Marburg Lahn, Germany.
e-mail maraqten@mailer.Uni-Marburg.de